

STAFF REPORT: 08/14/2024 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: D. RIEDEN

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2024-00432

ADDRESS: ALLEYS OF OAKMAN BLVD AND RUSSELL WOODS- SULLIVAN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

HISTORIC DISTRICTS: OAKMAN BLVD AND RUSSELL WOODS- SULLIVAN

APPLICANT: DTE/ JULIE A JOZWIAK AND SARAH KOSMICKI-JOHNS

PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 07/31/2024

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISITS: 08/01/2024, 08/05/2024

SCOPE: TRIM TREES AND REMOVE BRUSH ALONG OVERHEAD POWER LINE EASEMENT IN ALLEYS

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The geographic scope of this project, as received from the applicant, encompasses the concrete and sometimes inaccessible alleyways in the Oakman Boulevard and Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic Districts. The alleys are primarily located between residential lots paved with concrete, unpaved or in a state in-between, where vegetation or gravel exists. Some locations are inaccessible by way of fencing or overgrowth.

The development of Oakman Blvd was a result of Detroit’s industrial boom at the turn of the century, according to the Historic District Advisory Board’s report, *“Robert Oakman had a vision of a great broad thoroughfare lined with miles of splendid homes, all made beautiful with trees, shrubs and flowers... One of the unique features of Oakman Boulevard was the number of imported trees from around the world. His plan was to have these trees catalogued so that students wishing to study them could do so. By 1923, Oakman had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for roadbed and pavement for beautifying the boulevard with shrubs, trees and flowers making it one of Detroit’s major boulevards.”*

Just south of this neighborhood, Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic District consists of tree-lined grid system of streets and alleys comprised of eight streets that run southwest-northeast and four streets with alleys set back behind street facing lots perpendicular to the eight streets. Most of the alleys are now closed. The scope area for this proposal is the overhead power lines that run through most of these alleys. The easement granted by the City to the local utility company for maintaining these powerlines is the area of concern for this proposal.



Site Photo 1, by Staff August 1, 2024: Oakman Blvd. HD, Site #9 (facing west) showing typical alley and overhead powerline conditions.



Site Photo 2, by Staff August 5, 2024: Russell Woods-Sullivan HD, Site #6 (facing west) showing typical alley and overhead power line conditions.

PROPOSAL

The applicant proposes to trim trees along the overhead power line corridors of Oakman Boulevard and Russell Woods-Sullivan Historic Districts as shown in attached maps (See figures 1 & 2). This work also includes cutting away any brush vegetation that may grow in the alleys along these routes, including trees and within the following distances from the following utility equipment. (See figures 5&6)

- Cut any vegetation within 15' of the outermost conductor overhead lines.
- Attempt to remove all trees within 15' of either side of the utility poles along the ground that are less than 18" dbh (diameter at breast height).
- Trim all trees that are not removed to provide 15' of clearance from utility poles along the ground.
- At the top of the utility poles, clear any vegetation within 5' of the pole.

The tables below indicate approximate size, counts and species of trees will be cut or removed by this proposed work in each district. (See figures 3&4)

The proposed time period for this work is between August 16, 2024 and November 30, 2024.

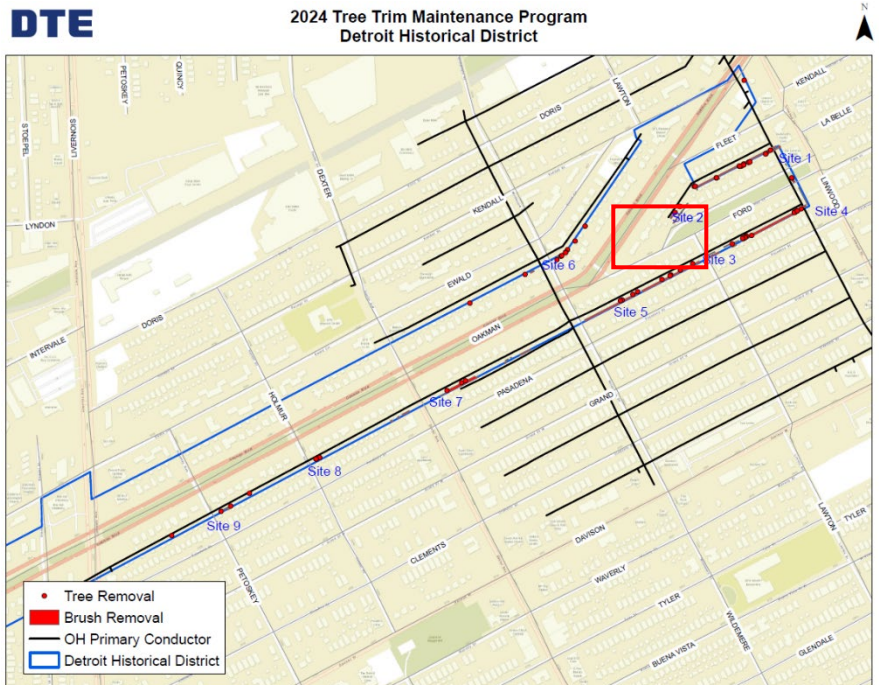


Figure 1, Oakman Blvd HD by Applicant: showing extent of tree and brush trimming and removal along overhead powerlines. Sites are labels added by HDC staff to show locations of photos and observations. The red box indicates a pocket park, Site #2, where staff observed potential impact on park trees.



Figure 2, Russell Woods-Sullivan HD by Applicant: showing extent of tree and brush trimming and removal along overhead powerlines. Sites are labels added by HDC staff to show locations of photos and observations.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Oakman Boulevard Historic District was established in 1989. Its Elements of Design (Sec. 21-2-152) provide the following guidance:
 - “Alleys are gravel...”
 - “Oakman Boulevard, with its wide boulevard divided by painted grass turf islands, well maintained dignified single-family dwellings and uniform spacing, has an urban substantial, yet low-density residential character.”
- The Russell Woods -Sullivan Historic District was established in 1999. Its Elements of Design (Sec. 21-2-168) provide the following guidance:
 - “The placement of trees on the tree lawn between the public sidewalk and curb varies from block to block or street to street, and is not consistent, although rows of maple trees have been planted to replace the mature maples on Cortland. Lack of street trees on some blocks likely reflects loss through disease of the American elms once common in the city. Replacement trees should be characteristic of the area and period. Plantings of new trees should be directed to “tree lawns” and medians.”
 - “Alleys have been vacated”
- Staff observed that past work in other neighborhoods by the utility company includes a trimming practice called, “sky to ground” where trees are limbed from the sky to the ground plane within the easements and their setbacks. This practice has left trees unbalanced and exposed to disease, thus, potentially causing harm to property by the loss of canopy and potential damage should the tree fall on private property (see site photo 3). Staff observed that the public notices sent by the applicant to show a graphic that seems to mis-convey the result of the work (see figure 7). Staff received the following response after asking the applicant if this “sky to ground” practice would be utilized in this proposal:

“The current tree trim specification that is being used in the area of Russel Woods is 5' clearance around poles and 15' clearance in either direction from the center of the pole on the ground. As well as 10' clearance aloft from the outer most conductor on the pole. Please be aware that trimming may have to extend past 10'

Trees to be Removed Breakdown:

Oakman Blvd. HD

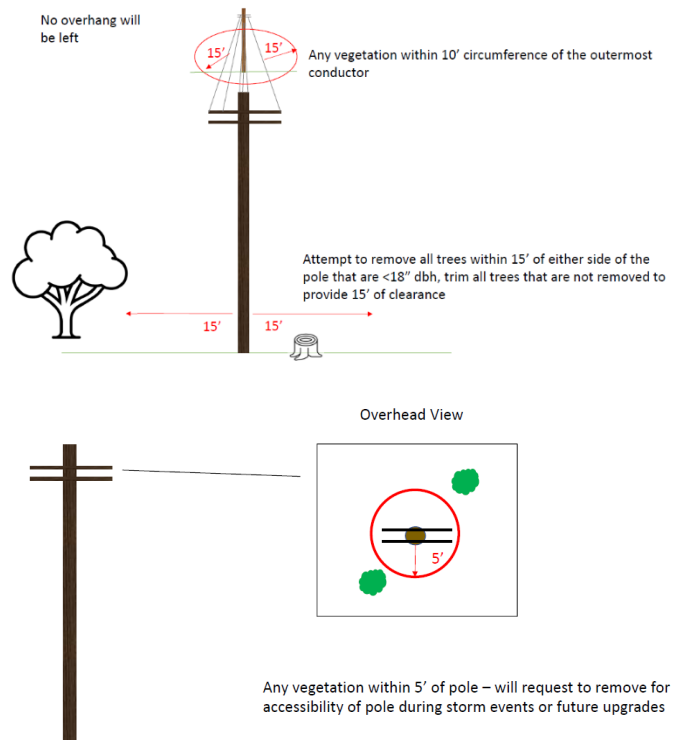
| Species | 4-10" DBH removals | 10-18" DBH removals | Priority Trees DBH 10.1-18" |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| MAPLE | 4 | | |
| ELM | 22 | 3 | |
| BOX-ELDER | 6 | 1 | |
| MULBERRY | 75 | 7 | |
| AILANTHUS | 8 | | 2 |
| BLACK LOCUST | 1 | | |

Trees to be Removed Breakdown:

Russell Woods - Sullivan HD

| Species | 4-10" DBH removals | 10-18" DBH removals |
|-----------|--------------------|---------------------|
| MAPLE | 1 | |
| ELM | 36 | 2 |
| BOX-ELDER | 9 | |
| MULBERRY | 108 | 2 |
| AILANTHUS | 48 | 1 |
| OAK | 1 | |
| HAWTHORN | 3 | |

Figures 3&4, tree species and count by Applicant: showing list of tree species type, width of tree trunks and count for each of the two historic districts.



Figures 5&6, tree trimming extents by Applicant: showing clearance distances from utility equipment where trees and vegetation will be trimmed or cut. Please note the powerline clearance distance is 15' not 10'.

to make proper arboricultural cuts for the health of the tree.” - DTE Regional Forester

- Since this response, staff received notice from the applicant that the 10’ clearance from utility lines has been increased to 15’ clearance. (See figures 5&6).
- Staff has no issue with the removal of trees, shrubs or other volunteer vegetation that may grow from the alleys’ surface. Trees growing from these historic utility corridors are not historic features and may be removed under the ordinance as “ordinary maintenance”.
- Trees that are of historic age, rooted outside of alleys, and have a canopy over the alley are those that staff observed carefully for potential conflicts with this proposed work. Historic age trees are defined as those that are 50 years or older or have other historic significance.
- Most tree species observed in the field by staff are considered “weed trees” and are not of historic significance, which means that they are mostly likely present due to neglect for care in the landscape and should be removed to maintain the health and historic beauty of the intended species’ canopy.
- Tree trimming activity is best executed during the months of December through March 15th to prevent disease. Staff observes that this proposal is outside this window.
- HDC staff observed several trees where powerlines are weighed down by tree branches were located outside of the limits of the scope of work as portrayed in the applicant’s maps. Staff requested clarification on the accuracy of the maps but has not received a response at the time of this report.
- Staff visited and photographed 27 sites in both historic districts (see figures 1&2) and observed the following conditions:
 - Most alleys were gated, obstructed or in unpassable condition, so staff’s main vantage was from the street into the alleys.
 - Near all vegetation would be considered weed species immediately in or along the alley edges. Staff has no issue with clearing these trees, vines and shrubs.
 - The applicant’s tree removal list contains species such as “elm” and “maple”. Some of these species could be historically significant. However, upon visiting sites, staff found that most of these species were not historically significant and would be considered a “weed” variety: i.e., “Chinese elm”, “Slippery Elm”, “Norway Maple” and “Silver Maple”.
- In Oakman Blvd HD along Ford Blvd, staff noticed a grove of honey locust trees planted along the terminus of an alley that leads to a neighborhood pocket park. (See figure 1, site #2 red box and site photo 4.) The powerlines here were weighed down by the tree branches to a point that are nearly touchable. These same trees are shade for seating areas along the park. The trees are of historic age and staff argues significance

What To Expect

How We Trim

Crews will trim a radius of approximately 15 feet around DTE electrical equipment.

Debris Policy

- Debris we’ll remove: small branches and limbs.
- Debris we’ll leave behind: larger pieces of wood (cut to firewood length); dead or diseased wood or debris; trees and/or limbs that fell due to natural causes.

Please Note: We do not remove dead or diseased vegetation.

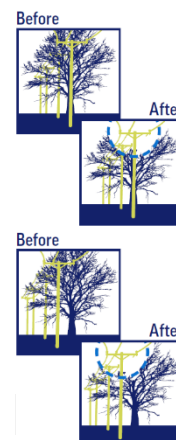


Figure 7, public flier by Applicant: showing expected outcome of tree trimming practices.



Site photo 3, by staff August 5, 2024, Russell Woods-Sullivan HD, Site #10.5, facing east, showing “sky to ground” trimming practice in contrast to the public flier diagrams in figure 7.

because they contribute to the neighborhood’s historic beauty as described in the HDAB report cited earlier. Staff would consider this park a distinctive character-defining feature of the neighborhood and these are the only trees contributing to this park. Staff understands that trimming activity is required for these power lines. However, staff has concern for the use of a 15’ radius and/or the use of “sky to ground” trimming practices at this location. Staff recommends a clearance of 10’ radius cutting at this location, at the prescribed seasonal time between December and March 15th to maintain the health of these trees. It should be noted that these trees are at least 50 years old, and while honey locusts are expected to live only 80 years, this is not sufficient grounds to endanger their health.



Site photo 4, by staff August 1, 2024, Oakman Blvd HD Site #2 in figure 1, facing west, showing untrimmed honey locust trees in a neighborhood pocket park and adjacent to overhead power lines.

ISSUES

- Historic districts currently have no recourse for lost trees if trees of historic significance are adversely affected by poor trimming practices. Staff recognizes the balanced need to maintain a historic tree canopy and the welfare of the community by maintaining power lines that are safe from potential storm damage. Staff looks forward to continuing a conversation with the applicant to work together on a potential resolution that may incorporate mutual understanding and best practices across city historic districts.
- Throughout most of the Oakman Blvd and Russell Woods – Sullivan Historic Districts, most of the alleys’ trees and vegetation are not of historic importance. However, there is the occasional oak, sycamore and the grove of honey locusts in the park along Ford Blvd that are of historic age and significance. These are distinctive character defining features of the neighborhood landscape and tree canopy and should be carefully trimmed when found outside of the alley proper and near overhead powerlines. Staff recommends a less aggressive trimming practice that is 10’ rather than the 15’ clearance radius for these historically significant trees. Staff also recommends trimming these historically significant trees during the late fall/winter season to reduce potential disease for these trees.
- Finally, the practice of “sky to ground” cutting for any large trees, historically significant or not, creates a danger to the health of the trees that remain and a danger to the surrounding structures. This practice introduces a form of visual blight that destroys the continuity of a historic tree canopy that has not yet been restored but once was a character defining feature for both historic neighborhoods.

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-78, Determination of Historic District Commission

Recommendation: Trim Trees and Remove Brush along Overhead Power Line Easement in Alleys

It is staff's opinion that the proposed work is appropriate. Staff therefore recommends the Commission issue a Certificate of Appropriateness for the work as proposed because it meets the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation and the Historic Districts' Elements of Design.

Staff recommends the COA be issued with following conditions:

- Trees located in neighborhood parks and public open spaces, such as those located at Ford Blvd, be trimmed no more than a 10' clearance from overhead powerlines and equipment. If feasible, these trees shall be trimmed during the recommended time between December and March 15th to reduce the chances of disease.
- No "sky to ground" tree trimming practices are utilized for trees that are rooted outside of the alley.